

harder. As a human resources manager for WestPoint Pepperell Inc., a Fortune 300 apparel manufacturer headquartered in the Valley, her responsibilities include convincing college graduates to relocate to this quiet community. It can be a tough sell.

"The biggest problem in recruiting students here is overcoming their fear of boredom, of having absolutely nothing to do after work and on weekends," says Williams, a West Point native. "Social animals who need lots of activities to be happy, even if they're good potential employees, aren't likely candidates to work here for us. They just wouldn't last long living in this environment."

From rural Georgia to the Iowa cornfields to the California desert, companies located in small towns—far from the bright lights of the big city—share a recruiting problem: How to identify new graduates who are both qualified for the job and suited to live in a community more akin to Mayberry than Manhattan.

Students trying to decide where to launch their careers face an equally troublesome chore. Dozens of Fortune 500 companies

recruit college students to work in out-of-the-way locations. And thousands of jobs are filled by new graduates each year at medium and small companies based in isolated communities.

The dilemma for students, particularly those used to big-city life, is whether they can be happy living in a small town. A rural job opportunity may offer challenge, responsibility, a competitive salary and a low cost of living, but little else. Weekends often

are spent on the road, driving to visit friends and relatives. Deciding where to eat out is easy, since the choices typically range from fast-food joints to small diners. In other words, accepting a job in a small town isn't a decision to be made lightly.

"Local people my age here are either married or in a different social clique, since most work in blue-collar jobs. Just the fact that I wear a tie every day means I'm an outsider to them, and they don't like outsiders much," says Michael Pruet, an accounting major at Auburn University who was recruited by WestPoint Pepperell last year. "I was born in New Jersey and grew up in Birmingham [Alabama's largest city], so I talk fast and don't have a thick accent. That means most people are suspicious of me from the start."

Pruet says three factors prompted him to accept his current job: the size of the company, the area's low cost of living and a girlfriend living just 40 miles away. "All combined, they were enough of a reason to live in this area," he says. After almost a year, however, Pruet is ready to move on. "Right now, I'm looking to move within the company to Atlanta or Birmingham."

His daily lunch routine is one of many reasons.

"Every Monday we go to Captain D's for fish, Wednesday is Mexican day [at the area's lone Mexican restaurant], Thursdays, we eat barbecue, and Tuesdays and Fridays we choose between McDonalds, Burger King and Wendy's. By the end of the week, we've hit every restaurant in town," he says. "If I don't spend another day working in a small town, I'd be happy."

Bo Powers has a different perspective. A native of Opelika, Ala., just 30 miles west of West Point, Powers says small-town life suits him just fine. "Family ties have a lot to do with me not wanting to move away, and the outdoor activities here are great," says Powers, a Troy State University graduate and shift supervisor in WestPoint Pepperell's Columbus, Ga., mill. An avid hunter, waterskiier and hiker, Powers says there's no place he'd rather live. He even shuns frequent trips to Atlanta for shopping, a staple among many WestPoint employees. "Atlanta is nothing but concrete and traffic, and I find enough shopping places around here."

Privacy takes a beating

Perhaps the biggest misconception among students about small-town residents is that

they're somehow out of touch with the rest of the world. Cable TV makes sure that doesn't happen. People situated hundreds of miles from the next largest town watch the same programs as those living in Chicago or Los Angeles, including MTV and Arsenio Hall. And hip magazines don't restrict their subscriptions to big cities, although many give that appearance.

The real difference between small and large towns, then, isn't sophistication but the nature of personal relationships. "In an urban setting, relationships are mostly secondary to activities. In a rural environment, relationships are primary. Everyone knows everyone else," says Douglas Bachtel, a rural sociologist at the University of Georgia. "It's more laid back in a small town, but that dramatically affects privacy."

For a new graduate moving to a small town, the challenge is being accepted by current residents without completely forfeiting privacy. "There aren't necessarily window-peekers around, but a new person is an oddity and becomes the topic of conversation," says Bachtel. How often you attend church, for example, can keep tongues wagging for weeks.

"Churches offer more than just religion. They're

the center of entertainment in many small towns," he says. "Friday-night softball, Saturday-night dinners and Wednesday-night bingo can be very popular. If you don't go to church, you're viewed with suspicion, not because you're considered godless, but because people will wonder what you do with yourself when you're not working."

Who fares best?

Graduates who are naturally outgoing and make friends easily tend to adapt quickly to this lifestyle. "Joiners do real well in small towns because they like to be known by everyone. They enjoy being big fish in small ponds, because they feel they can make an impact," says Nancy Noth, placement director at the University of Iowa.

Shy or otherwise introverted graduates, on the other hand, tend to have a much tougher time getting settled in a small town. "If you don't make friends quickly and aren't adaptable or open to new ideas, your experience could be awful," says Bachtel. "You could be met with hostility unless you show openness, friendliness and a self-

"You're not going to Ethiopia, but life definitely will be different"

Continued on page 15